

Chapter 1

Women's Political Participation in the Commonwealth: Issues and Challenges

Recognition of the importance of women's effective participation and representation in democratic processes has been widely acknowledged, and that genuine democratic elections must contribute to women's empowerment and strengthen gender mainstreaming at all levels of decision-making. The Commonwealth's guiding principles and values in the 1991 Harare Declaration, reaffirmed in the 2011 Perth Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM), emphasised improving gender equality and women's empowerment in the Commonwealth, and called on Heads to demonstrate commitment by entrenching measures to advance women's political participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making. The proposed 'target of no less than 30 per cent of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by 2005' (Commonwealth Secretariat 1996) is attracting increasing support from member countries. Actions to realise this global target, especially the equitable representation of women in the political arena, are constantly evolving.

One of the priority action areas of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015 (PoA) is to mainstream women's participation in democracy and peace processes, undertaken by the thematic programme on gender and political development in the Commonwealth. The programme is in direct response to the recommendations by ministers to the Secretariat at the Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting (9WAMM) in 2010 in Barbados, to embark on identifying strategies for increasing women's representation and influence in leadership positions with a view to strengthening effective policy-making (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010).

1.1 Challenges to women's effective participation in politics

Notwithstanding these policy prescriptions, steep challenges still impede achievement of the 30 per cent global target. Since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, women have only attained a 10 per cent increment in decision-making and leadership positions globally. Even though equality between men and women is guaranteed in our constitutions, a large percentage of political party membership is men, who tend to base political decisions on their own experience; it is therefore necessary for women to be represented to redefine political priorities. Women represent 1.1 billion of Commonwealth peoples, and form the highest number of voters in any election, yet they are the least represented in governance and political processes. Women particularly struggle against political legacies, which include colonial heritage, liberation struggles, single party dominance, military coup d'état, long rule and

despotism. Moreover, these political legacies have vested a culture of clinging to power without opportunities for grooming new leaders. Nepotism is rife and transfer of power has seen the devolution to family relatives, a form of 'political monarchy'. As a result, many women remain challenged by these limiting factors, which persistently hinder their participation. In addition, some Commonwealth countries have mainstreamed women into decision-making by recognising their overwhelming contribution in liberation struggles, civil wars and/or protest politics – in Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and South Africa – thereby sidelining academic excellence as a criteria or guarantee to participate in governance. More efforts are still required for women to attain the 30 per cent representation by 2015.

The under-representation of women's participation is mostly symptomatic of persistent gender stereotypes, conflict between family and work demands, patriarchy and the lack of an enabling political environment, inadequate funding to support female candidates, absence of special measures/quotas, low literacy levels, lack of job security in politics, the absence of female role models, politically motivated violence, corruption, and lack of training for political participation. As a result, many women are reluctant to compete in politics. The reality is that a lack of gender balance still persists at all levels of decision-making, with particular weakness in Pacific island member countries, where women represent an average of 4 per cent of all elected representatives, and in the West Africa region, where this figure is 10 per cent. Women's representation still remains at 20.9 per cent in the Commonwealth; this is comparable with global statistics which show an average of only 20.8 per cent seats occupied by women. In 2012, out of the 20 female Heads of State, 7 were from Commonwealth countries: Prime Minister Julia Gillard of Australia, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Bangladesh, President Pratibha Patil of India, President Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, President Joyce Banda of Malawi, President Monique Ohsan-Bellepeau of Mauritius, and Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago.

A third of Commonwealth countries show more than 20 per cent representation of women in local governance, with Lesotho leading with 49 per cent following the introduction of legislative quotas in 2005. Similarly, Australia, Canada, Namibia, New Zealand, South Africa, Swaziland and Uganda have also reached the global target of 30 per cent women representatives at the local government level. Nonetheless, female elected councillors and mayors remain under-represented in all regions of the world, and a significant number of Commonwealth member countries are yet to achieve the PoA target (Commonwealth Secretariat 2013).

1.2 Electoral systems favourable to women's participation

The Commonwealth is committed to assisting members achieve equitable governance through its work on democracy, women's political development and leadership in decision-making positions. The PoA recognises that socio-economic

development, democracy and peace are inextricably linked to gender equality. Democracy at the national and local levels promotes transparency and accountability and is essential to efficient and effective delivery of public services, thus stimulating economic growth and reducing poverty. Elections are the most visible representations of democracy in action, and integral to all areas of democratic governance. Despite the importance of elections, a genuine representative democracy goes beyond holding free and fair elections, but should involve all social groups and contribute to women's empowerment. The under-representation of women at the executive and cabinet levels is very real, and their absence at the decision-making levels makes it extremely difficult for them to participate effectively in governance and developmental issues that would otherwise benefit women, men, girls and boys.

The realisation is that overcoming the complexity of barriers that create and sustain women's exclusion from leadership demands strategic, multi-pronged and systematic approaches. *There are two options for consideration: either to allow the political system to transform itself over a period of time or to introduce affirmative action policies to fast-track women's political participation.* A variety of positive action mechanisms; constitutional, legislative, political and electoral reforms; and electoral quotas have been explored by governments and political parties to address the imbalance of women's participation at all levels of decision-making.

There are two main types of electoral systems: the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) or constituency system, where the winner takes all by simple majority; and the Proportional Representation (PR) or Party List electoral model, where seats are allocated to each party in proportion to the number of votes the party receives. The FPTP system is popularly practised in 33 Commonwealth countries. Its main disadvantage is that it gives larger parties a greater share of the vote with fewer votes for smaller parties, thereby excluding minorities and limiting women's participation. Most seats are won by incumbents, *mainly men*, making it difficult for women to unseat their male counterparts in well-established constituencies. This electoral model further involves 'money and power' politics, thus making it difficult for women to participate with limited funds or sponsorship.

The PR electoral model is favourable to women's political participation; the electorate may directly vote for the political party or for a candidate whose votes are pooled to his/her political party. However, the list is subjective to political parties, meaning that candidates owe allegiance to the party. The party list can either be closed (where voters cannot contest candidates selected) or open (where voters choose the party based on candidates selected). This electoral model has increased the participation of women in politics, particularly if accompanied by the 'zebra' or 'zipper' system of alternating women and men on the list – as in Guyana, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa. The Mixed Member Proportionality (MMP) system – a combination of simple majority and PR – has proved successful in recognising smaller parties

and minorities into parliament, and has also increased women's inclusion in decision-making in Australia, Lesotho, Namibia, New Zealand, Rwanda, Pakistan and Seychelles.

1.3 Quotas and electoral systems

Globally, 60 per cent of countries have adopted alternative forms of quotas, which have advanced women's representation in governance at the national, provincial and local levels. *Although electoral quotas are controversial, they have helped women enter politics.* Only 17 Commonwealth countries practise a combination of quotas and electoral systems (Commonwealth Secretariat 2013).

There are three notable types of quota systems used in politics: (1) voluntary party quotas – to guarantee nomination of women; (2) constitutional and legislative quotas – enshrined in a country's constitution and/or electoral law, political party policy or other comparable law of the country; and (3) reserved seats for women (legal and voluntary). Interestingly, some members are averse to quotas, which are seen as an impediment to appointing competent women to positions of authority. The 'politics of meritocracy' is preferred, but the reality is there are few women in leadership positions, and inadequate measures to mainstream women into politics further limit the opportunities available for women to participate effectively. Women leaders appreciate electoral quotas as an opportunity to enter politics, gain experience and build confidence to compete effectively in any electoral system.

1.4 Rationale for the publication

The strength in numbers of women in decision-making varies across the regions of the Commonwealth. This publication identifies alternative strategies employed by four countries in three regions of the Commonwealth that have met the global target of 30 per cent and effectively advanced the participation of women in decision-making at all levels. This has been through electoral reform in New Zealand (Pacific region), party voluntary quotas in South Africa (Africa region), and legislative quotas in Bangladesh and India (Asia region).

The country case studies articulate positive action measures to increase women in decision-making and provide key information on women's political participation at the national, provincial and local/communal levels. They facilitate knowledge exchange and enable member countries to strategise on different measures at increasing women's effective participation in leadership roles and decision-making.

New Zealand was the first country to grant women the vote in 1893, and since then the participation of women in politics has been seen as a normal part of society. It took a minimum of 50 years before electoral reform was introduced in the country, when women represented less than 10 per cent in

parliament. Electoral reform championed by the New Zealand Labour Party saw the adoption of the Mixed Member Proportionality (MMP) electoral system, which has brought about an incremental rise in the participation of women since the 1980s and now stands at 32 per cent. The case study on New Zealand clearly provides an alternative to electoral quotas: the introduction of the MMP electoral model resulted in an overwhelming improvement in the representation of women in the political leadership within party structures, the national assembly and executive in the 1990s.

Since the collapse of apartheid South Africa, the new and liberal constitution affirmed the participation of women and the institutionalisation of affirmative action policies by the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), saw the sudden rise of women from 4 per cent to 25 per cent in 1994. The representation of women has steadily risen since to 43 per cent over three elections held successively in this teenage democracy, and South Africa has become one of the top ten countries in the world to mainstream women in parliaments. With approximately 40 per cent women in local government, parliament and cabinet, South Africa is one of the Commonwealth's best performers with regard to women's political participation. Women have entered the corridors of power in their numbers, and have occupied non-traditional spaces, like the Ministries of Intelligence, International Cooperation, Home Affairs and Defence. South Africa thus stands as a shining example of consolidating democracy and strengthening women's effective participation in decision-making.

Bangladesh and India have excelled in mainstreaming women into local governance structures, following constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India in 1992, and institutional reforms to increase women's active participation in Bangladesh in 1997. These actions have seen more than one million women elected to India's Panchayat Raj and Bangladesh's Union Parishad (UP). Political parties have taken the lead to implement the constitutional quotas of 33 per cent and beyond, and have received financial rewards from national governments. Fines have also been imposed on political parties yet to attain the required quotas. This publication unveils the local dynamics at play in Bangladesh and India local government systems, clearly indicating an unfulfilled potential that requires further work to empower and leverage the equitable participation of women at the local level.

Beyond the numbers game, the case studies poignantly describe the positive impact of women's participation in these countries as a developmental resource in governance systems. The publication further places emphasis on the impact of women's participation in these countries on the national laws, socio-economic development, and political, constitutional, legislative and electoral reforms that have occurred since women engaged in politics and decision-making. Such changes have benefited all levels of society, further attesting to the critical importance of women's inclusion in decision-making.

Overwhelmingly, women still account for the most impoverished in any society, and it becomes necessary that the political gains achieved with women's engagement in political leadership are translated in the status of women at all levels of society.

References

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